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Musky Fishing the Incredible LAKE ST. CLAIR

By: Dock Stupp

Lake St. Clair is fed by Lake Huron through the St. Clair River and empties into Lake Erie by way of the Detroit River. It is not a Great Lake, but it is an incredible lake, and the Great Lakes musky is categorized as abundant in these waters.

Located adjacent to the Detroit metropolitan area, 256,000-acre Lake St. Clair takes in a tremendous volume of water, completely flushing itself every four days. For this reason the lake remains remarkably clean and clear. Other Michigan rivers like the Clinton River and the Spillway Cutoff Canal and the Canadian rivers such as the Thames, Puce, Belle, and Ruscom also influence the movements of most fish species, muskies included.

So, what makes Lake St. Clair such an incredibly prolific musky lake? When I asked this question of Mike Thomas, Michigan DNR fish biologist out of the Harrison County office and a Lake St. Clair expert, he replied, "None of the factors are more important than another, but Lake St. Clair muskies are self-sustaining. The muskies spawn in open water where *cara* grows, a low-lying musk-grass that is considered to

be excellent, musky-spawning habitat. The juvenile muskies grow and hunt in this healthy environment, feeding on forage such as redhorse, yellow perch, and emerald shiners. The older populations stay healthy because very few fish are harvested."

Finally, Mr. Thomas related to me that the river inlets and outlets provide currents and a temperature range that muskies enjoy, but most of all, Lake St. Clair anglers, guides, and charter captains are very dedicated to Catch & Release, a contributing factor in the growing musky population."

TROLLING TACTICS

I had read about some great musky-trolling days that a charter captain by the name of Captain Mike Pittiglio of Muskie Mania Charters was having on Lake St. Clair. We arranged a fishing day. On August 30, we left Michigan

Harbor Marina in cold front conditions. High northeast winds persisted as we headed to his favorite areas on the Canadian side of Lake St. Clair. In eight hours nine muskies hit, and four were caught. Among the muskies caught and released were a 48-1/2, a 49-1/4, and a 41-incher.

Lake St. Clair has an average depth of 13.3 feet with large areas of submergent weeds. Precise depths at certain times of the year are necessary so Pittiglio uses a variety of trolling techniques and sets.

Checking lures for weeds every fifteen minutes or so is important. By either changing lures or changing weights by snapping on round-ball sinkers to the front leader snaps, the desired depth is assured. The lead balls keep most of the floating and submergent weeds off the lures.

Keen observation is always one of the keys to success on the water. Watching his locator screens, not so much for hooks or big muskies, but for baitfish, he also watches the water. Windy conditions kick up bottom sediment that creates dirty or off-color water. Baitfish hide in dirty water and sooner rather than later, the muskies arrive on the scene.

On a typical day on the water, he starts out trolling different col-

ored lures at different depths and then adjusts as the day goes on. "When fishing is good, you get more hits and you change to the hot baits. Then the fire drill starts and it's fun for everybody."

Favorite trolling lures are Grandmas, Jakes, Wileys, Hi-Fin and Cat Tail bucktails, Nils Masters in the fall, and some locally made baits like Loke and Ziggye. His favorite trolling speed is 3.7 to 4 miles per hour.

THE LAKE ST. CLAIR POWER-TROLL SETUPS

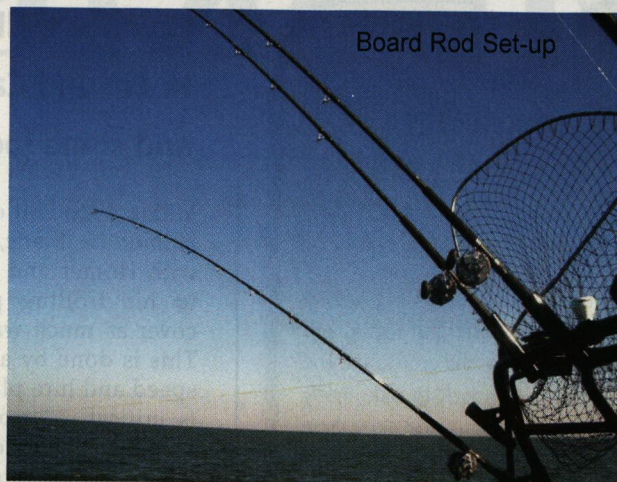
THE DOWN ROD & LONG ROD SETUP

The down rods are 4 to 5 feet long and the long rods are 10 to 12 feet long. The down rod set-up is particularly effective in choppy water. The down rod is placed near the front of the boat. Ten feet of line is put out along the side of the boat and attached to a 1-pound weight. The long rods have 0 to 10 ounces of weight and 10 to 50 feet of line. These rods

are then adjusted to conditions.

PLANER BOARD ROD SETUP

Board rods are 6 to 7-foot long and usually 3 rods at different depths are attached to a board line.



WASH ROD SETUP

(About the same as the down rod setup)

Most strikes occurred on the board rods that day. The Captain said that "70 percent of the muskies we catch come on the board rods."

The art of precision trolling requires exact repetitions of successful methods and techniques. Rod, reel, line, leader, and lure are all combined with proper boat speed to produce optimum results. Pittiglio uses Shimano Talora long rods with Shimano 700 Tekota reels. He spools his reels with 40-pound mono and uses 5- to 6-foot of 80-pound fluorocarbon to make his leaders. The leaders are attached with ball-bearing swivels and snaps.

Musky Mania Charters - St. Clair Shores, MI.
Phone: (586)-250-4068
Website-www.muskiemaniacharters.com

PERSPECTIVES ON SPEED TROLLING AND PATTERNS

"A clean six beats a dirty dozen," says Captain Don Miller, who has been fishing on Lake St. Clair for 30 years. What this statement means is that Miller likes to keep it simple while trolling St. Clair. He puts 6 lines out, making it easier to keep these lines free of weeds and foul-ups as opposed to running 12 lines allowed for 6 people on the U.S. side (1 line per person on the Canadian side).



MUSKIE • *Esox Masquinongy*

MUSKIE

Sliders

8 baits with 4 rods

This illustration shows that 4 rods can fish 8 baits where legal to do so.

By attaching a piece of line with a heavy crosslock over the fishing rod in front of the tip and around the line it allows the crosslock to slide freely to the point where a lead cigar type sinker stops it from sliding any further when activity occurs.

The lift rings on the back of the boat are ideal for fishing in the prop wash behind the boat, and allows one to fish there if they don't have a set-up to fish it by using a 8-10' long fishing pole and using the slider technique.

I recommend all leader material 80-100 lb. with the main line being 40 lb. Big Game Trilene.

Favorite trolling lures are Grandmas, Jakes, Wileyes, Hi-Fin and Cat Tail bucktails, Nils Masters in the fall, and some locally made baits like Loke and Ziggie.

Miller, a student of the late, great Homer Le Blanc, said, "I fished with Homer and one of the keys to his trolling pattern was to cover as much water as possible. This is done by a combination of speed and lure placement. Speed is critical. I troll from 4 to 6, sometimes 7 miles per hour and cover lots of water for the maximum amount of muskies to see your bait. But, I let water clarity dictate how fast I troll."

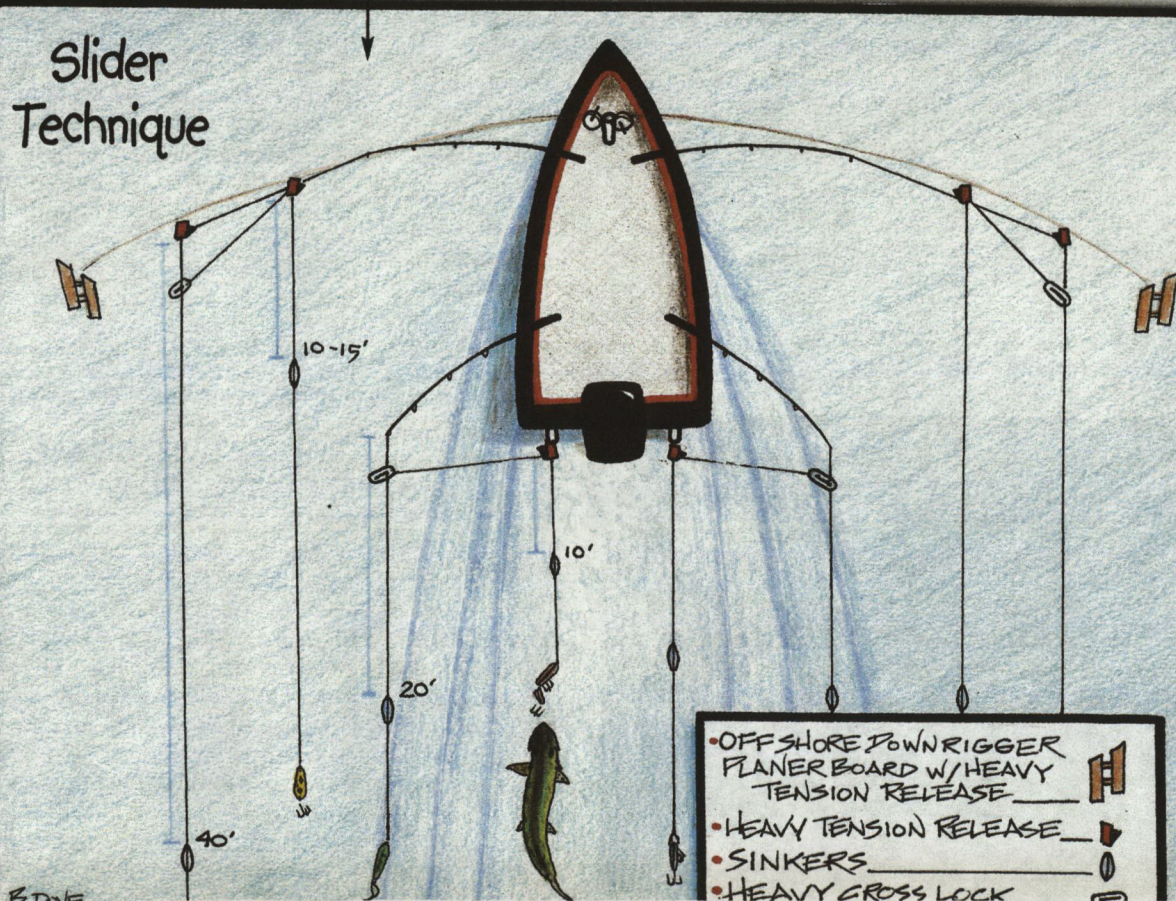
His philosophy is that muskies are not easily duped into striking artificial baits. He speeds up to 6 miles an hour in clear water but slows down to 4 miles per hour in muddy or cloudy water. This prevents a musky from getting too

good a look at his offering, making her make up her mind instantly, and produces a reaction-strike."

A typical St. Clair trolling spread is used, with two 4 to 6-foot down rods running very close to the boat, right in the prop wash. Two more 8 to 10-foot out rods are set parallel to the water at a 45 degree angle to the back of the boat. Finally, two planer boards, one on each side, are set.

Miller prefers the 28-inch, double-ski, off-shore, redwood planer boards with a heavy tension, double-spring release. Developed by Bruce De Shano, this system will not prematurely

Slider Technique



Musky Fishing The Incredible Lake St. Clair

go off when trolling at, say, 5 to 7 miles per hour.

Miller uses the Slider Technique (See diagram). Four rods can fish eight baits where legal to do so. This way the inside pockets (between the planer boards and the prop wash) are properly covered with baits. A planer board boom (pole) and the lift rings on the back of the boat are used with a heavy-duty crosslock and a release to allow the crosslock to slide freely on the line from the pole to a point where a cigar-shaped sinker stops it from sliding any further when a strike occurs.

PATTERNS

The musky season on Lake St. Clair runs from the first Saturday in June to December 15. Early summer finds the U.S. waters of Anchor Bay to be very productive. But it weeds up fast.

As summer progresses, Miller fishes the Canadian waters, where he works the 10 to 20 foot depths off of Belle River, Ontario. Another Canadian summer hotspot is an area known as The Dumping Grounds, located in the southeast portion of the lake.

Here we have the most pronounced structural area in the lake, the result of many years of dumping the dredgings of the man-made shipping channel on the west end. Large cabbage weed beds make up the structure on the southwestern end.

He runs his lures shallow and uses his lure spread and boat to comb these sporadic depths of 8 to 18 feet.

During the fall, the pattern changes again. A good majority of St. Clair's muskies migrate back to the U.S. side or northern end of the lake. Bigger muskies are targeted and bigger lures like a 10-inch jointed Believer are used to catch the big females that swim as shallow as 6 to 8 feet.

Miller: "I watch for current edges, weed edges, color edges like mud lines close to creeks and rivers.



Muskies hide inside the color lines. There's a contrast I look for."

He uses natural colors on favorite baits like Wileys, Eppinger Spoons, Believers and Grannies.

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